

wanting, waiting, water

a quarantine log

march 13, 2020 – may 14, 2021



mariah eppes

March 19, 2020

a quarantine love story

He covered her in sun in the old days, four days old, to be exact.

He always wanted to cross to the bright side of the street. When she remembered walking with him four days ago, the streets were so empty. Of course, they were emptier now, but the streets in her memory were empty of the weight—the new weight of accountability and risk.

But enough of that, she thought, I have to get back to work.

Everyone agreed that Microsoft Teams was pretty cool, a chorus of consensus among the little squares, people she knew in the backdrops of their various personal worlds. Not saying the obvious: *Imagine if this didn't work? What would we do?* Even though everything behaved like it was supposed to, when the WiFi cut out for a moment, the dead air was accompanied by a twinge of potential panic.

“But this Teams thing, yeah, it’s pretty cool,” said her boss. They all looked at each other in silence, one of her coworkers was frozen with a grin on her face, until someone said, “Alright, talk to you later.” And the call was over. And it was quiet in the kitchen. She marked herself “Available” on chat and got another cup of coffee. (Because why the hell not?)

He moved air beneath her in the old days, five days old, to be exact.

She was always floating just a little in his presence. When they went their separate ways, she was again surprised by the hardness of the concrete. And she walked all the way home, letting the winter chill fill the inside of her unzipped coat.

But enough of that, she thought, I need to get this done.

Her wrist complained about the constant micromovements on the trackpad, she didn't have a mouse at home. She had a long report to do, but the presence of her own walls seemed to erect a barrier between her and any urgency. Scraps of light bled through the paper curtains. She'd wanted to replace them since she moved in, but kept putting it off. Now she wished she'd just done it.

Around three she marked herself "Away" on Teams and went to the grocery store. She needed Coke Zero, half and half, and barbecue chips. Was this a sufficient reason to leave her apartment? Alarmed — it was damn near impossible to stay six feet away from other people. She tied a scarf around her face.

So beautiful out. Tried not to dwell on spring passing daily, on the reality that she would not see him among the rain and new flowers.

They bought each other coffee in the old days, six days old, to be exact.

Switched off picking up the bill, two drinks and a muffin, though he never ate much. Talked for hours in a perfectly common way, but she loved those hours, because during this time she could observe most clearly that she was not the only one in trouble here. She saw it in his eyes and hands and heard it in his voice.

But enough of that, she thought, I have to go to sleep.

She was awake. A completely shattered sleeping schedule; she forgot, for a moment, what day it was. Glanced at her phone on the nightstand, hoping for the blue glow in the dark — half-expecting it, even — but nothing. He would not send her any messages, of course. So why did it always feel like she was waiting?

A harried goodbye, on the last day, a goodbye now seven days old.

“Do you think this will be a big deal?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. *I should tell you now that I will miss you.*

“Keep in touch,” she said.

And he looked at her, gravely, pulled the floating feeling out from under her feet. Surprising hard concrete.

Today — eight days.

Another cup of coffee. Why the hell not? Another meeting at two. Eyes heavy and strained. Milky light through paper curtains. The kitchen is a mess.

The door to the bedroom clicks open.

Oh, did I not say there was another room? I never took you to the bedroom, but you never asked. And anyway, James is in there on a conference call, so we can’t enter.

James traveled so much in the old days. She never heard his voice as regularly as she did now, it was becoming familiar at the same rate that the other voice — the voice she missed — was fading.

It’s not my fault, she tells herself. Tries hard to remember the sound.

There is nothing from him yet, and there won’t be. Nine, ten days go by, or twenty. No use in being exact.

March 30, 2020

poem 1

maybe the next time we see each other
we will remember to talk about the way the
wings of a dragonfly go up and down; alternating;
the wings at the bottom going down
the wings at the top going up

in a book i learned that leonardo da vinci looked at dragonflies
down next to the moat of the castle where he was an artist
of the court. watching them carefully, he wrote about
the movement of wings and drew his conclusions.

i hope that next time we see each other,
we'll remember to talk about dragonflies,
and we'll laugh about how we'd like to be artists of the court,
and have all this imaginary time to wonder about important things,
to write down the movements of wings in our notebooks,
to chart the patterns of veins branching out from our hearts,
and we'll notice with a new and trembling awe that
they are the same patterns as the branches of trees,

each branch's width together equaling the total width of the trunk.

April 2, 2020

poem 2

(an advantage may be that i have tried
to anchor myself heavily in the real world)

prometheus and his brother epimetheus
were tasked with the creation of the human race.
because epimetheus forgot to give us fur,
prometheus gave us fire.

it is not quite one o'clock
i don't have time to wait to listen
cramping feels the same as creaking sounds
someone's boots against the ground

(although of course that heavy attempted advantage
seems totally unreal now)

or, instead, there was a race of golden men,
then silver, then brass, and now:
the iron men. we are doomed to sorrow—
being inferior—and soon zeus may just destroy us.

this chord sounds like a question

i don't have time to listen to telling me to wait

stretching feels the same as strumming sounds

fingertips against the ground

an anchor—

doesn't every set of legends

tell us something about the flood?

April 3, 2020

convalescence

“I could live like this forever.”

Texted those words to her brother and laid down on her pillow, spent several minutes staring at the ceiling. She watched a bird land on a branch of the tree newly blooming outside her window, watched it shiver and preen, sing a little, shiver, and go away again.

An hour passed.

Forever, I swear.

Her body felt both liquid and buoyant, at ease in the air for once, though it had taken these twenty days to feel the difference. “I’ve never been so relaxed,” she said to her orchid. Nothing short of a miracle.

(It should be noted that because she lived alone, because she never really spent the small income she earned, her savings allowed her to pay the bills despite being “temporarily laid off.” Bills are tough competition for miracles; it’s hard to tell anymore if you can have the latter without some contingency plan for the former.)

So why the great change? In her ordinary life she always seemed to dangle right at the end of her rope. At night—getting in bed by ten—was the most common moment to wonder: Can I do it all again? Sliding a little lower, maybe one hand slipping off.

“take a deep breath,” her brother might text back.

So she’d take a deep breath, clamber up the rope a foot or two, enough to go to sleep at least. And she always did manage to do it all again—the drive, the shift, the break, the shift, and the drive back. Coming in the door, glancing around her kitchen, hungry, she figured she’d rather be an

orchid—sitting in a pot in a sunny windowsill, all day until there were no days, not waiting for anything and never hungry.

Now, it's kind of like that.

There was such an immensity to the silence, it could be just as riveting as living to feel how massive it was, how her body could direct itself without the input of those inflicted orchestrated patterns. For a moment she lived in a memory: her mother saying, “You need to learn not to be so lazy.” But her body could direct itself! The silence was immensely massive and interesting. She said as much to her orchid, and she didn’t expect anyone else to agree. She’d known for ages that they didn’t. Everyone else’s rope was seemingly much longer and more durable than hers.

Her brother was behind the video call with the three of them. Since this all began, she hadn’t seen her mother’s face. Just fielded texts: “So what are u doing today?” “Did u get outside?” “Are u doing partial shifts?” In the call she dodged the same questions, the fuzzy electric sound of her phone’s audio echoing around her room. It was disappointing that despite its weight the silence was also fragile; the sound cracked it to pieces and made everything feel close, the opposite of vastness.

When the call was over, and she was gathering the pieces, ready to rest, her brother texted.

“she just does it cuz she’s lonely,” he said.

I haven’t felt lonely in twenty days, she thought, but thought only. Didn’t text those words or even tell her orchid.

April 7, 2020

poem 3

on the last day,
as i walked toward the office,
it began to rain.

i was surprised—rain wasn't in the forecast
and i had no umbrella.
not wanting to be drenched,
i picked up my pace,
and then suddenly
it stopped.

over my shoulder, the rain was still coming down hard,
pummeling the street and sidewalk—
but only in the spot
i'd just passed through.

when i went back outside for another look,
more people were clustered there,
recording with their phones,

and the rain fell even harder.

some men had blocked the area off clumsily
with a couple of orange cones and
sagging yellow tape.

i knew the water had to come from somewhere (the roof?)
but when i looked up, there was no suggestion of a source.
the sight resisted understanding;
torrential rain on one square segment of the block
and nowhere else.
the morning gained an eerie weight,
like everything was wrong and i was
not supposed to be there.

a woman watching next to me
shook her head in disbelief.
"why can't things just be normal?" i said.
she agreed, and laughing, went across the street.

April 8, 2020

poem 4

a recurring dream about a flood
this time, my mother and i stand on the sidewalk
(in the city of course)
looking up at a skyscraper as
water begins to spill over the
building and down toward us

fleeing, i realize i have brought
nothing; left all my possessions behind
to drown. i don't necessarily mind,
until i remember that among those
possessions are my journals and diaries,
which will certainly be destroyed.

"i loved those journals!" my mother exclaims,
closer to tears than me. i inherited at least two things
from her: rage, and a habit of whispering to myself
while going about menial household tasks. all i feel now

— wanting, waiting, water —

is a sinking in my chest, sinking, sinking,
we are too late, we will not escape—

—just a dream

so far i've found that

gratitude is the opposite of fear

April 16, 2020

poem 5

hope this finds you well
how are we holding up?
oh, ya know
i'm not gonna die from this, but
we can see you but we can't hear you
the epicenter of the crisis
these difficult and challenging times
we miss you
the first symptom is a fever
unprecedented _____
my friend had hydroxychloroquine and he's home now
we haven't had salt and pepper in, what, three weeks?
someone drove from new york to la in twenty-seven hours
i saw a bird I've never seen before
take-out and delivery only
six feet isn't as much as i thought
i haven't hugged anyone
the most vulnerable demographic
it'll be okay
maybe we can chat today

April 17, 2020

no going west

“Keep things simple,” said her sister, who lived only three miles away, over the phone. “I’m just taking one day at a time.”

There were two big problems with that well-intended advice. First, it was her habit—her *lifestyle*—to undertake complexity. Why ever go the easy way, when complications were exciting, and took her to more interesting places? Second, she was a constant planner-of-things, gazing days and months (and years) into the future. Wasn’t joy more often found in the anticipation than the experience? She wasn’t proud to admit that, but it was usually true.

Unable to sleep past 5:30, she let the dog out and watched him in the yard.

How could she take one day at a time—especially *simply*—when she felt the weight of each of the thirty-six days gone by pressing on her, pushing her closer to the center, where there was not much room left? If she stopped at all she had a tendency to stop hard. She was afraid of that, and just as she feared, her radius narrowed daily: the limits of her lawn, the inside of her house, the first floor, and now only the kitchen. Sitting on a stool, three stools across from her. Before all this, she sometimes regretted inviting people for brunch, but now it made her sick that the seats were empty.

Her son was in the city (one source of anxiety), while her daughter had recently called the whole situation “relaxing.” It was difficult not to take this personally; as if her daughter only said things like that to upset her. How could it be relaxing? If the money ran out, *she* would be one lifting everybody up.

But of course, that didn’t matter. She would always volunteer her help. Really, it hurt more that neither of her kids wanted to weather the crisis at home. She found herself jealous of her friends whose adult children still

lived with them, despite the many times they'd told her how lucky she was that both kids had successfully launched.

At 6, she let the dog in.

So many things had vanished. Her nephew's graduation. Easter. Her mother's 77th birthday, here and gone. Small weekly plans for dinner and coffee. Day trip excursions that she dreamed up and took her husband on. The world narrowed.

But there was one thing remaining: a vacation in July, over a year in the making, two weeks in California and Arizona. She had never been anywhere west of Chicago. Yosemite National Park, first—to see the giant trees—and then they'd drive to the Grand Canyon. A beautiful image she'd dreamed of for months and months, all of life sitting on top of it, elevated even in the low moments. As usual, she could already feel being there, the joy in anticipation. She allowed herself to get carried away on it for a while.

So the time passed.

Zoom tonite? 6? her sister texted.

Yes definitely, she responded.

At noon her husband came down for lunch. He loved working from home, going as far as to claim he was *more* productive than usual.

"Did you see this?" he said, putting his phone in her face. "Shut down till May 15th at least."

Of course she'd seen it, she checked the news almost every ten minutes.

"That was yesterday," she said.

“Looks like there’ll be no going west for us.”

She froze, had the impulse to plug her ears, to flee the room. Was there a way to unhear it?

Her husband stared at her, vacant. “What?” he said.

Could he create the circumstances by speaking them?

“How could you say that?” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s only May 15th. How could you say we won’t be going west?”

“I mean, jeez. It keeps getting extended.”

“We don’t know anything yet,” she said.

“Well, we shouldn’t be getting our hopes up.”

A lunch more silent than usual. Her husband went back upstairs with an afternoon cup of coffee.

She let the dog out at 3. Appeared to watch him in the yard, but didn’t really see. A momentary awakening: her neighbors on a walk. They were a young couple—the wife was pregnant. Scarf-covered faces. She waved at them through the glass door.

Back in at 3:30. In a couple of hours, she and her husband would have to patch things up well enough for the Zoom call. She would need to return for that. She still felt so far away. Driving on a long desert road to Arizona. Only now it was raining, and she couldn’t see the mountains.

April 18, 2020

poem 6

if “distance makes the heart
grow fonder,”
then i will never love again
with greater passion,

though the object of that
devotion isn’t
so obvious.

my affair with the sky is the most documented.
i never fail to make a note about the clouds,
to point out the moon and stars,
and i’m crazy about the weather,
even when it disappoints me.

but i think i’m also in love with hours.
i adore the way they die when
i’m not worried about their minutes;
though i admit i worry about minutes too much.
hours are more forgiving when i go walking.

and for that matter

i'm clearly enamored with walking,
which is a way to document the sky
and occupy the hours.

with sudden clarity i know
this is the truest desire.

i remember:
stopping on a corner
(look at the trail of a distant airplane)
the time is displayed near a bus stop
(the top of a building i like gets closer)
and i think it's funny how i've
used the whole day again doing nothing
(light turns red)
nothing but walking, looking, talking
and yet the time doesn't feel spent.

a patient heart might be more useful
than a fond one
oh well
i still wish my windows
had a view of the sun.

April 19, 2020

poem 7

reminds me of when,
as a child,
i wished with
desperate and fruitless effort
for the power to fly

seriously: i used to sit
at the top of the stairs
and feel just terrible,
like something i never had
was stolen from me—

peered over the edge, to
the floor, and wondered
maybe if i just jump?

the pressure of impossibility
there was nothing i could do
grieving a loss that was never a loss

April 21, 2020

skeleton city

Two travelers cross a vast desert together; over a land that shimmers verdant in certain angles of the light. The Green Desert. They've been going so long the sun leaves blotches in their vision, but the green sand seems—somehow—to protect them from predatory mirages.

The journey is not for pleasure, they are in the service of another, carrying the burden of both the obligation and the parcel. The latter is wrapped in tough fabric and tied shut.

Not to mention the third burden. There is something between these two, visible in their gestures and the way the second traveler walks a pace or two behind the first.

But it's okay: the destination is close now; the trial is nearly over. The walled city is rising like an island in the distance. Just a little beyond is the landmark of their legends, reduced in its reality, that makes the walled city famous. The complete skeleton of a beast, similar to an ungulate, so large that it is too large, like a mountain made of organized bones. No possibility that the creature could have really lived—obviously some ambitious and ancient art project.

Yet the legend says the skeleton was there before the city.

Suddenly, the first traveler stumbles, palms and knees sinking into the sand. The second traveler reaches down, but is shaken away. Upright again, the travelers don't discuss the skeleton or the city. The trial is nearly over.

When they reach the entrance, there are two guards, skittish and unarmed. The guards are hesitant to let the travelers through. The first traveler is surprised, having been there before, and not recalling suspicious people.

"We're delivering a package for a person called Ms. Toren," the first traveler says.

"We'll see what we can do."

One guard whispers to the other, who runs off under the archway, and through a tunnel that leads into the city. From this vantage point, the second traveler can see the bottom of the beast's skull, and a glimpse of an eye socket.

Before long the guard returns with a man wearing elegant clothes who introduces himself as the mayor.

"Let me escort you, personally, to make your delivery," says the mayor.

The first traveler is impatient—being so close to completion of the task—and agrees to the strange terms. The second traveler glances up once more at the skeleton's empty eye, and follows the first traveler and the mayor into the walled city.

The mayor talks constantly as they go, pointing out historically significant constructions and important statues. The roads are paved; it is a relief to walk on a surface that doesn't give way with every step. The buildings and streets are clean. Above them are windows with small decorative cacti in planter boxes.

But the second traveler is uneasy. From inside the city, the arch of the skeleton's spine stretches beyond the height of the wall, and the head curves inward, like a monster peering into a bowl.

"Where is everyone?" says the second traveler.

The first traveler shoots a look, but the mayor responds with ease.

"Indoors, for now," he says. "There is a beautiful plaza just around the corner. We'll pass through on our way to Ms. Toren's. It was named for the first mayor. A beautiful gift for our public to enjoy."

And the plaza, too, was empty.

"There is no one here," says the second traveler.

"It's early yet," says the mayor.

It's the second traveler's turn to shoot looks, which the first traveler ignores. But, despite impatience, the first traveler has been too many places not to know when it's early.

And it's not early.

"Where did you say Ms. Toren lives?" the first traveler says. "I'm familiar with the city, and while your hospitality is generous, we can manage without disturbing you any further."

"It's no trouble," says the mayor.

The second traveler looks up again at the skeleton's head. Something is drawing the gaze there, just under the beast's jaw, but there's no clear reason why.

"I really do insist," says the first traveler. "We've taken too much of your time."

"Perhaps I should simply deliver the package for you, so you can be on your way. Who sent it?"

"That's not for me to say."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's not mine, so I don't know."

The mayor is skeptical. “You don’t know what you’re carrying?”
“No.”

The second traveler looks hard this time, when the bones catch the eye, and sees it happen: a subtle shift, with a creaking noise.

“I’ll relieve you of your duty. The work will be done, and you can tell your anonymous client so in good faith.”

“I can’t, not until I see it in Ms. Toren’s hands.”

The mayor’s tone goes grave. “I think it’s better if you leave now.”

The second traveler raises an arm as a shard of bone separates from the jaw, takes hold of the first traveler’s shoulder and pulls back, so the two of them fall just as the bone smashes into the ground, cracks the stones of the plaza, sand and dust explodes into the air. The mayor disappears into the cloud. The second traveler rises, the first not far behind, and they scramble away from the destruction.

Still, not a soul emerges from any building. The travelers say nothing as they retrace their steps. Soon they see the two guards running toward the plaza. One of the guards stops when he notices the travelers. Hesitates. The second traveler takes half a step in front of the first, waiting.

The guard approaches them with his hands raised.

“Everyone’s gone,” he says. “Because of the fever. The mayor... there’s something wrong with him. We’re the only ones left. I think Ms. Toren went to Anawa.”

So the two travelers leave the walled city, back into the Green Desert, shimmering and vast.

“What now?” says the second traveler.

The first traveler shrugs, looks out across the sand. The second traveler knows there won’t be gratitude.

“We’ll go to Anawa,” says the first traveler.

April 23, 2020

poem 8

anger is an insect i'm chasing with a broken net
i have no trouble catching it—obsessive in
my fixations—but time dies fast in
this pursuit

anger going nowhere
except the circles we run together
around my two-room apartment

i don't taste the satisfaction
of its capture anymore,
but i always feel it like it's new,
impotent and insatiable

there is a sense that anger was once
taken someplace and used for something
is that true?

when the insect escapes again
it's honestly a release of pressure
at least there's something i can do
chasing it in circles; these two rooms

April 26, 2020

a reality effect

Reading Writing Degree Zero, I come across a line in the foreword (by Adam Thirlwell):

“... Barthes would famously argue that detail, in the end, is just a reality effect.”

So instead of writing fiction I decide to try looking at reality effects.

Consider a woman. It's not the superficial details that will make her real (her medium build, freckled arms and shoulders, tightly curled brown hair). But: her hair has grown out beyond its typical length and style, and she hasn't been able to get a haircut in 45 days. The curls make it unruly after a certain point. She's thinking about learning to cut it herself, but knows it will be a challenge; she's not equipped at all to do the job. Scrolling on her phone, looking at places to buy hair cutting shears. Finally ties it up in a ponytail and forgets about it.

I give her a problem, and so she's more real. Her vacillating hair concerns. Referring to the haircut as a job she's not equipped for suggests a feeling of ineptitude. Where do the details come from? Things I've heard people say about the difficulty of having very curly hair. My own understanding of how it feels to be indecisive.

The woman lives alone in an apartment with a balcony on the Upper East Side. Every night at 7, she goes out on the balcony and listens to the neighborhood cheering for healthcare workers, offers a too-quiet half-embarrassed whoop and clap of her own. She doesn't actually struggle too much, logistically, in the quarantine. Grocery store trips make her anxious, but only occur once every week or ten days. The space itself is enough for her and her cat. She works from home as a software engineer.

I know how it feels to be embarrassed when trying to participate. These quarantine realities are partially my own. I could have explained what “anxious”

look likes instead of saying “anxious,” but it seems too specific. I invented the cat, the type of work. I’ve been wishing that my mom would adopt a cat so she wouldn’t have to be alone. I think software engineer would be a lucrative enough job to get this woman an Upper East Side apartment.

She spends a good portion of a Saturday afternoon cleaning and organizing her clothing. In her closet, a purple dress she never wears but never gets rid of—it’s a pretty dress, and she *just might*, someday. On the floor, like a puddle, are the clothes she’s re-wearing during the week: a pair of black sweatpants and fuzzy slipper-socks.

It’s common to have clothes you keep even though you never wear them. The point of the detail is to make her common. I call the actual worn clothes a “puddle” to evoke unintentionality, their discarded simplicity, temporariness. At first I had “in a puddle,” but worried the metaphor wasn’t clear enough and could be taken literally. The black sweatpants and fuzzy slippers are a direct lift from life: my sweatpants and slippers.

On a short bookshelf in the living room is a framed photograph of the woman and her best friend, a roommate in college who now lives in Oregon. Conspicuously, there are no photos of her family, not on any shelf or on the fridge or anywhere. In fact, the photo of her and her friend is the only photograph on display in the whole apartment.

So, the woman is capable of friendship, but her friend is far away. And why a “short” bookshelf? It helps us know that she isn’t living in particular opulence; no wide, tall, towering bookshelf. I also created some mysteries. What about her family? Why is that single friend the only photograph she wants to see? Because, despite all these effects, we’re not just looking for reality when we read.

In the solitude of the last six weeks, she often goes to bed early. The streetlamp out her window is the only light. She doesn’t draw the curtains even though her bed is right against the window—she likes to look outside as she falls asleep. Nightly she indulges fantasies of various crushes she’s had over time, even long ago ones, just to see what it’s like. To map the shifting of her own feelings.

Now she has a habit that readers may not share with her, which could make her stranger or more interesting. Or it might render her more familiar. Readers will probably know what it's like to indulge a questionable behavior, to fantasize about people, or just to keep the curtains open at night. I use "crushes"—not former lovers—to create a sense that the woman is dreamy, floating, noncommittal (not nostalgic).

But mostly, the woman spends her extra time binge-watching Hulu (Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Seinfeld, Bob's Burgers) and teaching herself to crochet on YouTube.

Lately I love placing real artifacts (like TV shows and websites) into fiction. I'm not sure how this works as a reality effect. A fellow writer told me, after reading something I wrote with lists of contemporary song titles, that these real things "took her out" of the story. She wondered if I wanted to make up a bunch of fictional songs instead. I had considered this while writing, but ultimately felt the real songs were necessary. She thought either way could work, as long as I was "consistent."

April 29, 2020

poem 9

i want to write about your attitude
and the way you look when
you're excited

standing in the doorway
nodding your head
some light of discovery

we compare our notebooks and
find that we wrote the
same feeling in different metaphors

a storm brewing
a sparkling in the mind

in contemplation you revise
the secrets of everything
then take my hands and
try to dance

running fingers over my hair,
saying in all seriousness
that you think I'm smarter than you

a storm sparkling
a brewing in the mind

if i know anything, i know that's not true

May 6, 2020

the tedious, the silent, the charged

Three kinds of video calls:

THE TEDIOUS

“And seriously, how are we gonna sit six feet away from each other at work? It’s fucking ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding at her computer screen, where her friend’s face (scowling) was lit up. The most prominent feature was her friend’s chin. This was why she never used her phone to chat, the angle was hopelessly unflattering and nearly impossible to avoid.

“It’s just like, when’s it gonna start? What are we gonna have to *do*? Has your job said anything?”

“No.”

“I just feel like it’s all gonna be up to us. Like individual people.”

The call had already gone on for an hour but her friend kept shifting the conversation away from natural stopping points. These topics were already well-covered and there weren’t any new insights to make, beyond repeating the basically irrelevant news updates that confirmed and denied contradictory perspectives every day. But her friend was very keen on “staying in touch”—and lived alone.

“I really don’t know,” she said.

“Anyway,” said her friend. “55 fucking days. The antibodies thing is barely even real I heard. Did you hear about that?”

It would have been easier if her friend wanted to talk about something else, anything else.

“No,” she said.

THE SILENT

At 8:03 p.m., her mother texts: *FaceTime tonight?*

Her eyes ache from three long meetings at work. But she replies, *Sure*

At 8:27, they’re on FaceTime, looking at each other’s chins.

“So what did you do today?” her mother says.

“Uh, worked. Yeah,” she says. “You?”

“Me too. Busy week.”

Or really: b-b-b-b-b-b-b-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-w-e-e-e-e-e-kuh.

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“You’re cutting out,” she says.

“Oh, sorry,” says her mother.

[]

“Okay now?”

“Yeah,” she says.

[]

“Really nice day,” she says.

“Yeah. I have the windows open.”

[]

“What else did I want to tell you about?” says her mother.

“Did you go for a walk?” she says.

“Not today. I’ll probably sneak out for one tomorrow.”

“I think it’s raining tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Or: r-r-r-r-r-r-e-e-e-e-e-e-al-al-al-al-ee?

[]

“Yeah.”

THE CHARGED

They had never discussed these things before; aware their beliefs did not align. She was trying to pull back, she was trying to be less angry.

“It’s honestly a disgrace,” she said. “We can’t act as a unit. We can’t, like, do anything coherently.”

“Mmm,” he said. He had his chin in his palm.

“You know the Netherlands said that their citizens in the U.S. should come back? Because they didn’t want any of them stuck in a place with such a shitty health system?”

“Well, the thing about the Netherlands... the taxes are really high.”

“Who cares?” she said.

“Normal things, like milk and things, are really expensive.”

“But they can afford it, so who cares?”

“Mmm,” he said. He shifted, sat up straighter in the chair.

“Every other first world country has universal healthcare.”

“The money doesn’t just come from nowhere, hun.”

“It shouldn’t be like this,” she said. Trying to pull back. “That’s all I’m saying.”

His phone fell off the little plastic stand he used: a brief blur, the color of the carpet in her childhood home, then black. He picked it up and readjusted it.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said.

[]

“Well, something’ll have to change,” he said. “There’s big pieces of plexiglass in front of the cashiers at Walgreens. Everything will be different.”

“Will it, though?” she said.

May 7, 2020

poem 10

i have several certain questions
and i'm not the first to ask

but there is an atrophy of possibility
in your forum, the elephant in your room

perhaps you think i shouldn't be capable of
earning both your admiration and your disgust,
and this is why you are afraid of me,
why your forum can't admit my questions
into such a useful discourse

don't worry (i can still give you some relief)
they don't have to mean anything if you don't want them to
just another example, just a symbol, just an ordinary lie
you have practice making these distinctions; up to you,
after all, always you who decides which signs
to call the truth

having pacified you now i see
you are at least amenable to my presence
if not to the sound of my voice
(perhaps you see what i can do
and this is why you are afraid of me)
now: before i lose you completely

who is your enemy?
are you going to eat your neighbors?
exactly when will you enact your revenge?
where are you going with those guns?

May 13, 2020

listening to the mourning doves

I'm out of fiction. No images around which to assemble any words. No voices speak. A shock to the system—sustained the last six days—finding out I probably won't be back in Manhattan before September.

My mind won't catch on anything. I look in harder books and don't remember what I read. Sixty-two days ago, I might have taken this feeling, placed it elsewhere with a "she" and given her company, but today it doesn't occur to me to do that. Hours are going away. My to-do list gets no shorter. I decide I won't put this piece with the rest of them. Is this a piece? I am told to take a break. I don't know how. I flew away and pretended I wasn't here, I wasn't in this place, the flight is easy and habitual, but now I've landed on the ground, and wherever I was before is better than here, but that place never existed. I don't remember that until I return.

I flagged a hundred lines and closed the book. I wrote everything down illegibly. So far I've crossed out (one second let me count) fifteen lines, and there's only twenty-five total. Sixteen. I don't have metaphors yet. Seventeen. Sometimes I get started and when I look again another hour is gone. I remember going to Walmart with my mother and browsing the office supplies until she was done shopping. Acquiring more notebooks to cross things out in. That memory appeared with a feeling before the image; movement of errands and vague desires to buy things I didn't need. Things that were blank with possibility. I didn't wash my mug, I just took a new one from the cabinet. I was supposed to do this thirty minutes ago. I am told to take a break, but I feel as if it's just been one long break. I don't actually feel like that, but I didn't cross it out. I don't actually feel like anything.

My original idea was to keep my distance—to show things through a few layers of separation. This is the opposite. Out of fiction. Out of images. Out of poetry. 62 days. 90 more promised. Shock to the system, hoarding

my answers, some kind of shift will happen here (I hope; I deem it thus before I know).

I keep writing this down and finding no place for it to go: *listening to the mourning doves*.

May 18, 2020

poem 11

floating now, on the sun
a couple mornings every week
we saw the dormant fish returning
we saw the park all flush with weeds
i thought they were pretty, actually

we talk of death so flippantly
even me, punishing people
with ironic departures

there's nothing transcendent
in these passings
all graceless, all so well-deserved

even us who don't believe in final judgment
get a kick out of condemning them to it
as if we in our rage had that ultimate power

counting transgressions in the warm air
assigning comparative values to their evils
is this the only justice we ever get?

this isn't how i want to spend my morning
a few fish gasp against the murky surface
of a dingy brown pond

June 1, 2020

poem 12

you can't grow a peach
in a snowbank
on a mountain
in greece

but how would i know?
i get altitude sickness
and i hate winter
and i've never *seen* greece
and my favorite peach is the emoji
(and it never means peach)

it seems like we live more than one life at the same time
the daily one, peach emojis, idk
and another one—deep ocean picture life
a picture can't be deep, they say the ocean is,
but i've never *seen* it
i don't *see* it with my eyes

that's what it seems like anyway
nothing ever really is anything else
or ever is what it's supposed to be

no decency or reason in
either deep or daily life, inside one
or the other, they won't merge together
there is no purpose and that doesn't upset me

why? because i like to *see* you
see you with my eyes
the purpose being that i like you
and i like to
a decent reason, enough for me

that's what it seems like anyway

maybe it's time to take a handful of fire
and melt a snowbank
grow peaches there on the mountain
does greece have mountains?
i don't have enough fire
never enough fire in me, just smoke
spitting out my fingers

that's what it seems like anyway

but maybe you're free?
are you free to be *seen*?
to meet? at least?

June 10, 2020

while walking

There was a man sitting in a foldout lawn chair on the paved path up to his house. He was playing guitar, a blue surgical mask hanging off his face by one ear, singing “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” a little off-key.

We walked to the water and all we saw was fog.

An old woman waved her hand to me as I passed her on the sidewalk. I said good morning. Usually I would have responded with just a smile, but I was wearing a mask. She was too. Maybe that's why she waved her hand. She turned around and said thank you. We stood about eight feet apart. Then she said, “This whole thing is really terrible.” That she was 83 years old. That it wasn't right for people to say oh, it's just the old people dying. “I have a friend who was spit on.”

We went outside before 8 AM, before it got too hot, and stood next to Starbucks. An ancient golden retriever was nearby, waiting, not looking at us. We kept our polite distance from the owner. When was the last time I pet a dog?

Me to myself, day 90: “I’m just gonna get really good at virtual mancala and not let these things obsess me so much.”

June 24, 2020

pressure

Adorno / Minima Moralia

Walser / Jakob von Gunten

Above all: never think of yourself as an outcast. There are no outcasts, brother, for perhaps there's nothing in this world that's worth aspiring to. And yet you must aspire, even passionately so. But so as to become not too full of longings: realize that there is nothing, nothing worth aspiring to. Everything is rotten. Do you understand that?

The world exerts its pressure. I can't remember a time in my life that felt more pressurized. The circumstances are extreme. The reactions and demands are drastic. I'm certainly not, on a base level, at ease.

In some ways it feels familiar—existing with “reality” in some semi-far future, in a middle place between living and life. This reminds me of how I felt as a teenager and an undergraduate, trying to do what I could to be ready for the gates to open, the key feature of life being that the gates were *closed*. It does not remind me of how I've lived since then.

And in the old adolescent middle place, the place-I-waited-for was fixed, inevitable. Hopes as expectations. This current waiting is in flux. Hopes as cautious idealizations.

Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.

It can be upsetting, like time has been stolen. Experiences expected are gone, one less opportunity to ever experience those expectations. But it's not true. Living is living is living. That's what they don't tell you. It's the perception of a middle place that's skewed. Really, the fact (?) is everything is skewed. The most obvious explanation is often the most egregiously wrong.

To do nothing and yet maintain one's bearing, that requires energy, a person doing something has an easy time in comparison.

After stretching, just to feel my muscles do something, I find myself cleaning the bathroom. I wasn't calm while stretching. I wasn't calm while trying to breathe deeply. I picked at the bottom of my foot. I wondered if I was experiencing sugar-induced temporary insanity from a milkshake. I read that intellectualizing allows one to separate from the root of the experience: the emotions. One does not want to feel. My nightstand, piled almost comically with books. Another pile has started on the floor. I thought, damn, do you really have to call me out like that?

Since there are no longer, for the intellectual, any given categories, even cultural, and bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims, the effort of producing something in some measure worthwhile is now so great as to be beyond almost everybody.

Changes in perception, restriction, constraints (excluding real suffering; safety is a requirement) may allow for new creative understanding. But then I go outside and see people eating outdoors. I buy a milkshake. Using dollar bills has a novelty to it. When confronted with life, everything I've written seems insufficient. Life is bigger than the new plane of thinking I may have reached by day 104. A man walks by, the back of his shirt says: What America Needs Right Now Is a Drink. Am I an intellectual? What is, in any measure, worthwhile?

For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity.

When it feels like we're seeing life through our bubble, our little shield, waiting, looking around in horror. Sometimes nothing to say except "Jesus Christ, this is fucked." Any news about New York being blocked to American travelers? People on Twitter pick each other apart but every step is complicit. Release the prisoners for god's sake—because who actually deserves to be in a cage?—but then throw others

into our cultural/semantic prison, where there is no path to rehabilitation. The crime is unforgivable. But what now? Every step is complicit. And I'm not sure I even consider myself an intellectual.

You must hope and yet hope for nothing. Look up to something, yes, do that, because that is right for you, you're young, terribly young, Jakob, but always admit to yourself that you despise it, the thing that you're looking up to with respect.

And yet I have some foggy sense of pursuit, some longing for what I can't put into words. Foggy but emotionally vivid. I want some kind of, way of, experience of life—it seems graspable, actually, should I just move in the correct direction. I simultaneously feel like I don't understand anything.

The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity.

Give me all your aphorisms, please.

July 15, 2020

leaving

On day 125, I entertain ideas of leaving altogether. Half-joking before, but now half-serious. I dream uncertainly. Doesn't the world seem so small, no matter how big you think? Do they have the same problems in Paris? What about Canada? Mars?

"The downtown in Ann Arbor looks nice."

I am seduced easily by promises of bookstores.

"I don't think I'd survive in the Midwest."

He's probably right; my born-and-bred Northeastern co-inhabitant.

"But it's Ann Arbor," I still protest. "Not the Midwest."

I've never been to the Midwest, except for five days in Indianapolis during a high school student leadership conference. It was summer. I had never experienced such uncomfortable heat in my life—and that's saying something, since I lived in the desert.

What about California? I still remember the first time I saw California with my own eyes, on a sixth-grade school trip. The houses on hills amazed me. From the tinted bus window I was already convinced I was looking at the most perfect place in the world. When I got off the bus I thought the air smelled different (better) than anywhere I'd been before. (It would be a few years before I saw New York.)

I look at a map to see which parts of Canada are in the same time zone as the eastern U.S. Even if our sister to the north grapples with similar issues, no one seems to talk about her, and that's good enough for me.

When someone says they want to pack up and get out, another clever person usually responds with something to the effect of: *wherever you go, there you are*. That turns out to be true. But this time it's not me that I'm afraid of.

July 26, 2020

too much with us

On day 136, I wrote: *it is too much*. A poem I was once forced to memorize echoed back to me. Wordsworth, 1807. Can't every line be read with this contemporary lens?

The world is too much with us;

Two possible readings: The world is too much with us in it, or the world has become too much filled with us. Is the world too much or are we too much? Is it a mutual perfect destruction (fire meets gasoline) or fire meets forest?

late and soon,

I've described the current "moment," even before the pandemic, as too early and too late. Usually I mean it in reference to the life experience of millennials so far, but maybe others can relate to the feeling now.

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;

"Lay waste," meaning to destroy utterly. Or, a waste: our powers are wasted in the pursuit of buying and spending. Consumer capitalism is a waste of human potential.

We also forego our powers to protect each other against the virus in order to get and spend. You can't really blame small businesses for wanting to be open. No meaningful help is coming—those powers having been laid to waste by the people who ought to exercise them. What else can they do but reopen?

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

Nature with a capital “N,” so maybe we have to stick with Nature to mean the natural world, the environment (though I would have loved to make some argument that human beings are conditioned *not* to act naturally).

We own nothing. Nothing real, anyway; nothing in Nature.

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Is there any exclamation more true? Our hearts being gone, we must always provide a good, affordable reason to care about others. The only flag to raise: “we have given.” I’m not sure most of us willingly gave anything. I think our hearts were taken, for the most part. Under threat of repossession or eviction.

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

When I first memorized the poem, this line was always where I began to lose the thread of meaning—like a wave, knocking me over. The image is of Nature in confidence, commiseration, or physical connection with the moon; a relationship beyond human interference. The word is *bares*, not *bears*. Suggesting exposure, vulnerability. Trust.

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

Howling (constant expelled energy) and no need for rest. A power we can’t understand.

And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,

All this power and transcendent connection—now hastily gathered up by us. Innocent, helpless, dormant, potential, imprisoned beauty.

For this, for everything, we are out of tune; / It moves us not.

A half step up is sharp, a half step down is flat, but C# and Db are the same note—it just depends on where you started. But if we can't find ourselves moved? That's called natural.

—Great God!

A gasp.

I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

We are not the first to wish fruitlessly for a bygone time. “Suckled” implies the dependence and innocence of an infant. The wish is not only for another creed, but for the guiltless existence of a child born into it, not expected to change anything. Lately I've been reading Thomas Jefferson's letters, and think often of how unrecognizable our world would be to him. Even in yearning for the comparative simplicity of another time, we should know that there is only so much the outworn creeds can give us. Maybe it only seems simple because we know how it ends.

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Instead I stand on this pleasant paved walking path next to the highway. But my glimpses do make me less forlorn: the bridge, trees across the water, otherworldly purple and red clouds as the sun goes down. Manhattan in the distance, often hazy. A gigantic cargo ship or someone on a jet ski.

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; / Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Something bigger than ourselves would be comforting, to make all of our concerns seem small. If there was Proteus or Triton, existing on a greater plane with their more consequential agendas, then we could be absolved of our responsibility.

July 28, 2020

still changing permanently

Oh, there it is, my rooted feeling. For one second too many I glossed over the top and set some gear spinning, no relief from the wrench. Turns out we are the simplest creatures. All we need is to lie still and be pet like any other mammal. Tell me it's okay, preferably with your hands.

If the hope is for something sensical, it's not coming. I get it, imagery and metaphor are insufficient, rhythm's not enough. I know how it feels to be dissatisfied. Now I also know how it feels to have nothing more to offer, even as I watch the filling up, aware that the line on the glass cup won't be reached.

Lying still: there! I almost felt it. The way it was to turn and look over my shoulder, to cross the street with you. You said oh how wonderful and I said thank you, see you next week. 10, 9, 8, 7. Rocking forward and back in my thin shoes, I felt the heat of the pavement.

Today I felt the heat of the pavement. Almost felt it—that it was okay. Even though all those rooms in the window are empty now. I can hardly imagine. I said things are still changing permanently and you said they *really are*.

August 20, 2020

i met a monkey in new jersey



When rescued on day 156, some muscle memory of normalcy kicks in. I know how to walk down the street to the gelato place. I know how to do this with company, even if I can't see their faces.

We pass by a giant pink stuffed monkey sitting in a chair outside an antique store. Y. says, "I love this monkey!" Takes a photo and sends it to me.

Only a few people are allowed inside the gelato shop at a time. The four of us are standing there. Y. and C. love this place and talk about how nice the owners are. But we can't really stay to meet them; there's a line forming outside. C. says, "It's our friend's birthday," and they give us a discount.

At night, Y. and C. generously drive us back to Brooklyn. I watch the world going by out the window and am reminded of long car rides many years ago. I feel grateful and peaceful and worried and sad.

A few days pass before I understand it. Day 161. A dual feeling. It wasn't terribly hard for me to settle into the constraints; they were familiar. I hunkered down to wait (another kind of muscle memory).

And the release from waiting was beautiful. But I said dual feeling—the other side of it is longing. A cousin of how it feels to go back to your hometown; walking the streets that used to be yours, and feeling deep inside that they are no longer yours. We are rehearsing a show that already closed. I can't help but wish for what I've known, since I'm going through those movements, since I don't know what is coming.

September 19, 2020

rip rbg

When I hear that Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died (day 190), I am in the grocery store looking for bars of dark chocolate. Between 65–75%, ideally. For baking muffins.

The grocery store is such a terrible place to get bad news that it's become a perfect place to get bad news. A movie scene; the point being to juxtapose public mundanity and private distress. Strangers passing by, ignorant of the change in you. The pop song descending in the aisle becomes immediately, ironically relevant.

Baby hold on to me

Whatever will be will be

We choose the “bold, silky, dark chocolate with bright, subtle fruit tones”; 72%, 10% of the proceeds go toward “saving the wildlife.”

I have been wondering lately if this is just the beginning. Writing conclusionless pages on these questions, *in media res*: has it ever been possible for people to stop the worst before it happens? Or, once the machine has been set in motion, the gears turning, must it always come to pass? Could our darkest historical moments ever have been prevented? Is this already the wrong question, since history is subject to a point of view? Is it happening now? Are we in those ominous years before the years that will one day be infamous?

I almost forget to remember the power of her life.

At self check-out, isolated in our pod of plexiglass, the machine doesn't recognize that we've brought our own bags. The pop song descends.

You can rely on the old man's money

You can rely on the old man's money

We go home and assemble the ingredients for the morning: there will be bread and chocolate muffins. This time we're trying the muffins with orange zest, it's supposed to be a good combination.

Later I fall asleep listening to an audiobook: *The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryōkan*. I find it comforting—that a person like this existed, that he lived alone at the top of a mountain, without possessions, writing poems and practicing calligraphy.

But tonight I learn that even Master Ryōkan fell in love, late in life. In his last five years he trades haiku with a young nun. He asks her in three lines to please come see him in the spring.

I find it comforting.

October 19, 2020

poem 13

years ago i was in daily awe of new york city
sitting on a bench on river street in hoboken
not so sure i'd ever know that place,
that i'd ever have any sense of it but awe

back then i had this careless way of crashing into a seat on nj transit
making up for early times when i was nervous about the tracks
a vision of my friend (more years ago) sprawled
between facing seats,
her boots crossed on one and her shoulders pressed into the other,
lying in mid-air as she scrolled her phone,
like the whole thing was hopelessly dull and mundane

one sunday in the fall we waited five hours for the dinky
(fine, i'm exaggerating)
just to spend a little time somewhere besides new brunswick
every building looked like a castle and
i still couldn't believe i was in this famous place,
even though we made fun of the kids who went to *that* school

we spent too much money buying the cheapest entrees
at a nice italian place
the youngest diners by far, and underdressed

we went home as it got dark and cold
the conductors aren't attentive between nb and princeton junction
you can save your ticket for next time,
and they never told my friend to put her feet down

November 13, 2020

friday the 13th

I should write something. Right? Isn't this the most important moment?

"It feels like going back in time," I said later. We will remember where we were when we found out.

I was sitting in the compact camping chair I bought to carry to the park. Watching baseball players and talking about the Beatles. My six-feet-distant friend and I heard it from other people almost simultaneously.

I got a text, PENNSYLVANIA, all capital letters.

We were immersed silently in our responses to those others for a few minutes. When we awoke, we forgot what we were talking about. The baseball players shifted to the next inning. Something about the Beatles?

*

"It feels like going back in time," I said earlier.

It rained all week. I didn't mind. Threads of possibilities floated around in the air. I tried to pluck them, but couldn't commit to any particular train of thought. Wariness? Hopefulness? I blocked all my apps. Suddenly everything seemed ridiculous. I didn't want to hear anyone's opinion about the appropriate levels of relief or joy or indignation. Not that I am not relieved. Not that I am not joyful. Not that I have no indignation.

*

"It feels like going back in time," I said, just now.

We have returned to Friday the 13th; day 246.

Our last Friday the 13th was day 1.

November 17, 2020

dialogue

Heart: help

Head: i will dust the bookcases

Heart: something hurts

Head: i have made a better to-do list

Heart: how much longer?

Head: i will get through my reading

Heart: i am tired

Head: i have nothing to eat, why didn't i go to the store?

Heart: bring me that blanket

Head: i really should not be sitting on the couch it is bad for my posture

Heart: i remember so many beautiful things

Head: 30 minutes to lunch

Heart: i miss everyone

Head: i am angry and i don't know why

Heart: i want roller skates

Head: okay you can have those

December 5, 2020

word association

Day 268: I have nothing to say but want the feeling of writing. I write the first word that comes to mind. And then the next and the next, as fast as possible.

After this I feel lighter. It seemed to allow all the activity, the churning images and words in my head, to fade away. Immediately, my mind felt quieter.

grapple / in a star / cosmic / wonder / barrel / hard / knocks / cherries / disappointments / elaborations / snakeskin / weather / unimaginable / heaven / hope / clear / skies / roller coaster / unbecoming / becoming / michelle obama / party lines / party favors / acrobatics / stilt walkers / homecoming / football / beer / screaming / tired / sleep / dreaming / nightmares / alarm clock / carrot / raspberries / repetition / doing dishes / stretch / backache / shaved legs / rowing machine / crew team / ivy league / amtrak / philadelphia / window / relaxation / sunset / timer / spaghetti / dinner / hungry / dessert / chocolate / cookies / biscuits / happy / hopeful / content / comfortable / soft / blanket / skin / breathe in / meditate / gratitude / open hearted / healthy / nonrestrictive / welcoming / doormat / paws / dogs / pets / in 2027 we will live in an apartment that allows pets

tea / fear / fire / hot / yellow / bee / flower / truce / choice / cards / hanafuda cards / games / sitting on the floor / dust / sweep / chimney / cozy / santa / christmas / memory / anticipation / joy / cinnamon buns / mornings / tears / spongebob / gray / 4 am / walking / popcorn ceiling / tears / longing / incite / excite / delight / sleep tight / moon / palm tree / backyard / sand / beach / air / content / calm / bliss / kiss / chocolate / blanket / chill / open window / languid / languish / ocean / atlantis / mermaid / hair / shower / lavender / purple / cozy / lonely / hoping / settle / foot falls asleep

December 12, 2020

extracts from emerson

“The American Scholar” / extracts reordered

“Each philosopher, each bard, each actor has only done for me, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself.”

“Patience,—patience with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world.”

“I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.”

“Some great decorum, some fetish of government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. ... In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time,—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone that this day he has seen something truly.”

“There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.”

"I would not be hurried by any love of system, by any exaggeration of instincts, to underrate the Book. We all know that as the human body can be nourished on any food ... so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great and heroic men have existed who had almost no other information than by the printed page. I only would say that it needs a strong head to bear that diet. One must be an inventor to read well."

"It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago."

"I look upon the discontent of the literary class as a mere announcement of the fact that they find themselves not in the state of mind of their fathers, and regret the coming state as untried; as a boy dreads the water before he has learned that he can swim. If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."

"When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended and books are a weariness,—he has always the resource *to live*."

December 21, 2020

always read le guin

“Bryn Mawr Commencement Speech, 1986” / extracts reordered

“But when you look at yourself in the mirror, I hope you see yourself. Not one of the myths.”

“If being a cog in the machine or a puppet manipulated by others isn't what you want, you can find out what you want, your needs, desires, truths, powers, by accepting your own experience as a woman, as this woman, this body, this person, your hungry self.”

“People can't contradict each other, only words can: words separated from experience for use as weapons, words that make the wound, the split between subject and object, exposing and exploiting the object but disguising and defending the subject.”

“The essential gesture of the father tongue is not reasoning but distancing - making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other.”

“When we started talking again, we didn't talk objectively, and we didn't fight. We went back to feeling our way into ideas, using the whole intellect not half of it, talking with one another, which involves listening. We tried to offer our experience to one another. Not claiming something: offering something.”

“The mother tongue, spoken or written, expects an answer. It is conversation, a word the root of which means ‘turning together.’ The mother tongue is language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship. It connects. It goes two ways, many ways, an exchange, a

network. Its power is not in dividing but in binding, not in distancing but in uniting.”

“Being human isn't something people can bring off alone; we need other people in order to be people. We need one another.”

“Will you let yourself be silenced? Will you listen to what men tell you, or will you listen to what women are saying?”

“As I've been using the word 'truth' in the sense of 'trying hard not to lie,' so I use the words 'literature,' 'art,' in the sense of 'living well, living with skill, grace, energy' - like carrying a basket of bread and smelling it and eating as you go.”

“And so on; you see how I want to revalue the word 'art' so that when I come back as I do now to talking about words it is in the context of the great arts of living, of the woman carrying the basket of bread, bearing gifts, goods. Art not as some ejaculative act of ego but as a way, a skillful and powerful way of being in the world.”

“Even in novels by women we are only just beginning to find out what it is that happens in the other room - what women do.”

“I know that many men and even women are afraid and angry when women do speak, because in this barbaric society, when women speak truly they speak subversively - they can't help it: if you're underneath, if you're kept down, you break out, you subvert. We are volcanoes.”

December 22, 2020

poem 14

i have these excellent daydreams now,
as if the further i slip slowly from the way things used to be,
the reward i get the gift is this impossible vividness,
this irreplaceable sense of it;
it, this, much realer with my eyes closed,
much prettier in my soul doze,
as if the further i drift wholly from the shore i used to see,
there is another crescent shape another glimpse of sand,
and this one's golden.

this, it, really pretty easy to believe.

January 6, 2021

dumbstruck

seriously? what am i seeing?

i'm not looking

(i intentionally look at nothing)

but shuddering—

questioning—

i look at nothing

bringing my hands to my face

and (dumbstruck) someone tells me not to be surprised by
what i see

but i am always surprised

i refuse to reduce it to the expected

peeking through closed fingers

ducking for cover under my desk

not looking,

i don't see anything

January 12, 2021

i don't even wanna be poetic about this

but there's no other way

it probably used to feel like you could stamp your foot into the ground
and something would remain, or if it went away that'd be okay, it
didn't matter, it was just a footprint

images in my mind from nowhere, or somewhere deep that is for some
reason awake now: tucking my feet under me in a chair in gray light:
snow in colorado / pulling a beetle out of the pocket of my shorts / an
old friend how i remember her

in my dream i think that the barista really ought to be wearing a mask,
but i still get close to her face and whisper my order in her ear

across the table you are laughing, you seem so happy and i wonder
why, but i don't ask because you smiling makes me calm and i don't
want you to stop

elevate my language, elevate my dread, i thought it would help

but now i just feel like i am forgetting something

manhattan seems frozen, the same but with tension, like glass, like
water, like a reflection, but i go through the familiar motions and feel
so so so relieved, i don't know if that's an appropriate way to feel but
that's how it felt

please don't talk to me

not *you*—you please talk to me

i want to be understood by you

there should be a place to go scream so you don't upset anyone

and to find out how loud you can be

February 17, 2021

the ophthalmologist

On day 340, I go to the ophthalmologist. Madison Avenue, 12 noon, 29 degrees.

ophthalmologist: you have great retinas

me: thank you

ophthalmologist: but i'm sure you hear that all the time

me: ...nope

me: i think this is the first time anyone has ever told me i had great retinas

ophthalmologist: it's a good pick-up line

Realizing that this could be construed as him picking me up, he backtracks quickly, and places himself in my role—hypothetically trying to interest someone via my excellent eye health.

ophthalmologist: "i have great retinas"

I offer a laugh (a polite one, we are all socially rusty, but I'm kind of laughing at him) and he shines a white light into my great retinas. I see the shadows of veins or rods or cones or something splashed across my vision. This is the closest I've been to a stranger in nearly a year. I think: this could make a good story later.

March 3, 2021

second nightmare of an alien invasion

This is my second nightmare about an alien invasion, within a week.

I'm looking at small objects on the bookcase in my childhood bedroom, trying to pick out ones to put into my backpack and take with me, as an artifact of a life we are about to lose. I have some idea that I might be able to "process" the experience this way, that the transition might be easier if I take a minute to reflect and grieve.

I look out the window and see three gigantic UFOs. The biggest one appears to be crashing (later I attribute this to the time I spent reading about the *Hindenburg* on Wikipedia, looking at those photographs and reading eyewitness accounts). Another UFO sprays some kind of liquid onto a crowd of people. A man who's been hit with the stuff runs forward toward his wife, but she backs away from him.

Now that I see the ships, I understand how nothing can prepare me for this. None of the objects I've saved seem useful, at worst they are a waste of valuable space. I realize I will never be able to bring all my journals with me. I begin to go over the catalog: which are most important....? which will I miss the most....? what will I want to remember....?

I wake up, with a feeling like I am sinking slowly back into my body, and another feeling impossible to describe correctly: how strange to have such vital choices snatched out of necessity. I am back in my bed and nothing needs choosing or even can be chosen.

In the quiet early morning this seems like its own kind of loss.

March 14, 2021

day 365: fluid stasis

I want to write something about day 365, but I'm having trouble. I consider doing a continuation of "a quarantine love story," but it seems cutesy, and anyway the spark that gave me that story doesn't appear for a new one. All I can think about is how the weather changing reminds me of *Animal Crossing*. The weather changing makes me happy and depressed. While dozing I thought of a phrase that seemed accurate: *fluid stasis*. I want to just... I want to.... there's nothing to say. Just wanting? As always.

I did it—even though I said I wouldn't, not until it was all over. I read back the entries in this quarantine log. I find them eerie. I can feel the feelings again easily, as if it was just a day ago. I never could have imagined this moment. It would have been too terrifying to think of *a year*. Back then I could hardly tolerate the thought of a summer. How much has been lost. I started counting the days with a sort of dark humor, but now I don't know when I should stop.

I contribute to the collection manically in the beginning. I remember it well. I remember directing the weird energy I had to this. I'd write a few days in a row, no more than a week between entries at the start. I put my other projects on hold. Inventing fictional realities to correspond to my sudden new reality. Poems express the bulk of my emotions until that form falls away too. I'm left with a kind of figurative confessional prose, not lucid enough for an essay, but not poetic enough for poetry. When I'm very lost I turn to writing by others and find connections everywhere.

Even though the experience still seems accessible, it also seems a little unreal, the way we lived day to day without knowing. How did we manage? The way I feel the feelings of a year ago is now through the lens of *how it turns out*. He does not get reelected. There are effective vaccines (that we wait to be eligible for). I have been so lucky.

Lately the days are overwhelmingly beautiful. I'm in unspeakable bliss in this kind of air. Like I could never want anything else. The season always hits me hard, but this year it's so heavy I almost want to fall to my knees. Spring. I love the feeling of transition. More than love. I *need* it or

something. The sense that you could do anything, make any decision, be anyone. I want the power of.... a tornado, a tornado comes to mind, but I'll hold myself back from destruction.

Spring is not a season for holding back. Maybe that's the problem. But of course the problem is everything, bearing down on me, and you too. After 365 days, maybe we are different. I feel different. I feel like I *want to be different*, so maybe that's why I say I am. How else can I make it essential? How else can I make it true?

March 22, 2021

first day of spring in jersey

Somewhere along the line the trees and soil in central Jersey started to smell like “home.” Route 27: at certain times of day the sun blinks through the trees like a strobe light and always makes me dizzy. This brings back memories. Everything seems to bring back memories. I put my elbow against the passenger side window and shield my eyes with my fingers. I can’t even describe the way I feel but I still try. “It’s amazing that you can just get in the car...” “It’s a perfect day.” “The sky is so big.” We love being able to see the moon in the daytime. The simplicity of things makes me weak. I feel like I should berate myself for being so single-minded; how could I not have seen how much was here, just waiting? I am a guest in this house and I might be expressing my gratitude too effusively. Route 206: there are so many places I haven’t seen and will never see. Endless shades of ordinary days. Just passing through; I could watch people coming and going forever until we leave the people behind and watch the trees. That was our intention. Watch the trees. Step intentionally into the mud.

There is this weight to things. Will it ever fade? First I feel the weight as fear (I find myself wondering if I’ll make it back alive). But once that lifts I remember that it’s easy, incredibly, this is the stuff of days, the first day of spring—the sun warms a blue chair that I’m sitting in, the backyard where I am a guest. Will it ever feel less precious? I don’t have to think about this right now. There is a new rosebush to be hopeful about. I want to hear all about it. None of these fates seem as terrible as I imagined.

I would like to stop thinking now. Maybe I really could let it all go and leave it behind. Over time. There is a lot to let go of. I fall asleep to the last few cracks of flames and the heady smell of cinders in the fireplace; lulled into a soft place, where I want to stay.

(thanks to Y. & D.)

April 9, 2021

vaccinated, part 1

April 8, 2021. Day 390. I go to a CVS in Chelsea to receive the first dose: Pfizer.

I get my white card, the one I've seen all over social media, this time with my name on it. They've marked the floor with yellow tape, indicating the line to wait in.

"Follow the yellow brick road," says the woman who checked me in, talking fast. She must have given this spiel hundreds of times by now.

There is a young couple waiting ahead of me, talking with an older man looking for laundry detergent. The older man says, "You must be so excited." He's felt sorry for the young people this whole time. "You're supposed to be out doing stupid things. Just a little stupid." The young man says, "Yeah, we're in college, so it really sucks." The older man says congratulations and leaves with his Tide. The college couple wave goodbye and their eyes rest on me, they are primed for more conversation. So I give a thumbs-up. The young woman giggles, she rolls periodically onto her toes; a dancer, maybe.

"Best day of the last year," I say.

They giggle, and agree, and tell me about themselves, but are called back for their turn before we can finish talking.

There are flimsy partitions erected to create small cubbies. Behind these false walls shots are being administered. When it's my turn, a man with a calm voice and surgical gloves (and a mask, of course) asks me how I'm doing. "Good," I say, and sit down in the chair as directed. He looks young, and when I confirm my birthday I wonder if I'm older than he is. I'm probably almost a decade older than that college couple. When did that happen?

He asks me again how I'm doing. At least his voice is calm.
"Good," I repeat. "*Great.*"

I look away, stare blankly at the various laundry detergents on the aisle visible beyond my false wall. Even though I'm not really squeamish about needles, sometimes I psyche myself out.

The side effects reported are as various as the methods people have used to snag appointments. It doesn't really hit until I try to sleep. I'm awake half the night with pain, in waves. I was reading *Two Years Before the Mast* before bed, so I have images of storms at sea—drenched sailors battling wind and rain, dark abyssal nights lit only by stars—playing in my semi-consciousness. I hope it will be time to wake up soon (it's not).

On April 9th, I'm tired. Tired. Pain in my shoulder. My grip still isn't perfect. I forget and spill half and half all over the table. Everything seems so sad, but I know that's just the lack of sleep talking.

Really, everything is good. *Great.*

May 2, 2021

vaccinated, part 2

April 30, 2021. Day 412.

Every day the sun lasts longer but I keep reaching. That's how I've felt the last three weeks, waiting for this day, April 30th. First I forgive myself the fidgeting, the fractured attention, the feeling like I can't grasp anything. Reaching. Next in the cycle is judgment. Frustration. And forgiveness again.

To be *close* is not to have the thing itself. *We're close, we're so close* only lifts your spirits for so long. Close doesn't seem very different from far.

I don't even feel the needle this time. I don't feel the ache through my shoulder and neck during the requisite 15-minute waiting period. The woman supervising us as we wait forgets me—*Did I check you in? Yes!* I say, rather too emphatically. Yes, yes, I'm done, I'm supposed to be done now.

Leaving the pharmacy, I enter into a sudden wild wind and spitting rain. It's supposed to be 70 degrees. Above me is a single massive dark cloud—in the distance, looking down 10th Avenue, I can see that the sky downtown is blue and bright and beautiful. This day is both. Dark and bright. Black and blue.

Hours later and I have no bruise. I test my arm, lift and rotate, nothing. I bought Tylenol just in case. For a second I worry that they haven't given me enough, that there's been some mistake and it's not over. But people say it can take a day or two for this one to hurt. I still behave as if it hurts. No tasks, just resting, even though my mind doesn't want to rest. It wants to reach. I wait to feel something.

The next day I finally descend into some foggy fatigue. The tension snaps. I am no longer reaching. Lying in bed I watch the wind push and pull the curtain hanging over my open window. The room fades to gray, brightens, and fades again. Clouds passing over the sun. Some version of relief. I rest. Rest and wait for the fog to clear.

May 14, 2021

426 days

Today marks two weeks since the second dose. I am fully inoculated. A bumblebee drifts past my elbow. I feel the texture of the air on the parts of my face that have lately been covered. Somehow I feel a greater affinity with the flowers.

Does it feel like this for you, too, I wonder? A strain of pain in this relief? Coming back allows my emotions to come back, my excitement, my looking-forward-to. But every pleasure is also a reminder of what's gone, of how thin our worlds could become.

Life halted overnight. You remember. I started to write things down. If I could not have my life, at least I could have these stories and poems and reflections; at least there would be something meaningful left behind. Unknowingly, I gave myself a great gift: an ending, some closure, however arbitrary. From here, we get a series of new old firsts. And there will surely be new complications. Isolation has made me feel soft and breakable. The world seems full of sharp edges. My first instinct is to long for that hard exterior; the shell I had before. But I'm also curious. What would happen if I refused to grow it back?

Let's not drag this out too long—it's already been 426 days. This is the last entry of my quarantine log. Today I begin something else. The process of letting go. And I'm done counting.

Well, almost done: in seven more days, I'm getting on the train for the first time. I'm going to see my mother.

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